The Incredible Human Paradox

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Herbert W. Armstrong's book, The Incredible Human Potential, paints a grand picture of where true Christians are headed: becoming part of God's divine family and ruling the universe with Jesus. The idea at the heart of the various offshoots of the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) is that God is currently working with a select few, the members of the true Church of God. These "called" individuals are destined to reign with Christ after his return, helping him guide humanity toward its full potential during the subsequent millennium and beyond (1).

While the book ostensibly pertains to all of humanity, the impetus is on what the reader must do to be part of the better first resurrection and become eternal members of the divine ruling family in the Kingdom of God. It sounds inspiring, but there's a catch. The WCG doctrine that God is calling a few in this age and the rest of humanity later after the Millennium, despite its apparent empowerment, actually creates an apocalyptic mindset that can be surprisingly disempowering. The overwhelming emphasis on a future role in helping the world can lead to neglect of present-day concerns and a sense that those not currently "called" are somehow on the sidelines.

This article examines a paradox, contending that the apocalyptic worldview held by the defunct WCG and the plethora of active splinter groups, intertwined with the doctrine of calling, ultimately hinders human potential. This future-oriented focus can make the present feel less significant, encouraging a "wait it out" attitude that keeps individuals from fully participating in the world and achieving their potential here and now. Furthermore, the WCG approach to public preaching, being directed towards a world they deem "uncalled," raises questions about the sincerity of their message. If God is not calling the majority of humanity – and thus a humanity that cannot be converted – the religion’s evangelistic efforts appear disingenuous, serving primarily to fulfill a perceived duty rather than a genuine expectation for conversion.

The Problem with Apocalyptic Worldviews

With their emphasis on an impending end of the world, apocalyptic worldviews can sometimes lead to a devaluation of present-day concerns (2). This can manifest in various ways, from disengagement with social and political issues to a deprioritizing of personal well-being. For example, some individuals holding apocalyptic beliefs may deprioritize retirement savings (3). This can result in financial insecurity in their later years, leading to dependence on family members or government assistance and creating unnecessary stress and hardship (4).

Apocalyptic worldviews can foster disengagement and apathy. The expectation of an apocalypse can push individuals to feel detached from worldly affairs, leading to reduced civic participation and a lack of effort towards positive change (5,6). Such disengagement is an obstacle to progress on a range of critical challenges, including those of a social, political, and environmental nature.

Anticipating the end of the world can generate significant fear and anxiety (7, 8). This constant state of worry can have a detrimental impact on mental health and well-being. Fear and anxiety can lead to social isolation, difficulty concentrating, and even physical health problems (9), hindering individuals from living full and productive lives.

The Trap of Future Focus

The "Incredible Human Potential" vision certainly paints a compelling picture of humanity's destiny, but its focus on a future apocalyptic scenario can have some unintended downsides for the present (10). This perspective can diminish the view of a person's potential today, create an over-reliance on outside forces, and even devalue what we accomplish in our lives.

WCG's apocalyptic worldview, almost by definition, suggests that humans in their present state have severely limited potential (10, 11). This can be a disempowering idea, discouraging personal growth and the pursuit of goals that aren't directly tied to this "World Tomorrow" they talk about. If one views the present as merely a fleeting prelude to a future utopia, it can diminish the motivation to invest in personal development or contribute meaningfully to society today.

The WCG approach also stresses how futile human willpower is and how we absolutely need the Holy Spirit for any real transformation. While that can be comforting for some, it can also lead to feeling helpless, dependent, and like you don't really have much control over your own life. When individuals believe they are incapable of effecting positive change without divine intervention, they may become passive and less inclined to assume responsibility for their own lives.

This worldview can also diminish the value of human achievement. By attributing all meaningful accomplishments to God and focusing on the resurrection, the WCG approach risks devaluing human effort and ingenuity (12). This can lead to being dismissive of others and a diminished sense of pride in one's own accomplishments. By attributing positive changes in its members' lives solely to divine agency, the church risks overlooking the crucial role of human agency and personal effort in achieving such transformations.

Moreover, the belief in the timing of a person's calling, with its emphasis on a select few being chosen in the present age, can foster fatalism and acceptance of suffering (13). It can create a sense of detachment and hinder action on pressing social problems, as individuals may believe that suffering is an inevitable component of God's plan.

Helping Humanity… Later

The WCG doctrine of calling, with its emphasis on a future role in helping humanity during the "World Tomorrow," can devalue present-day action and create a "waiting" mentality (14, 15). The potential consequences of this delayed focus on helping humanity, include missed opportunities for growth and impact, social isolation, and a disingenuous approach to evangelism.

By prioritizing a future role in the resurrected world, the WCG approach devalues addressing current global issues (15). This can lead to a sense of detachment from present-day suffering and a reluctance to engage in efforts to alleviate it. While the desire to help humanity is

commendable, delaying that help until a future time can result in missed opportunities to make a difference here and now.

This future-oriented mission, coupled with the belief in the exclusivity of their calling, can also lead to social isolation (16). When individuals believe they are part of a select group destined for a unique future, they may distance themselves from those outside their community. This can limit collaboration and hinder efforts to address global challenges that require collective action.

Furthermore, this emphasis on future roles can lead to missed opportunities to utilize members' talents and skills in the present (17). When individuals believe their primary purpose lies in a future world, they may neglect to develop their potential and contribute to society in meaningful ways in the present. This limits their personal growth and their ability to make a positive impact on the world around them.

As mentioned in the introduction, the public preaching efforts by WCG offshoot sects, directed towards a world they deem "uncalled," raises questions about the sincerity of their message (18). If the majority of humanity is not currently being called and thus cannot be expected to repent, be baptized and receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, then the church's evangelistic efforts appear superficial and disingenuous, serving merely to fulfill a perceived duty rather than a genuine desire for conversion (19).

What exactly is the call to action when preaching to the uncalled? Is it to partially repent, but not be baptized? Is it to obey God with your limited human effort even though you won't have the benefit of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to truly keep the spirit of the law, but at least you'll be able escape the Day of the Lord? On a side note, the last statement is often the call to action for the membership of a WCG offshoot, creating another paradox internal to the church: the message of human inadequacy coupled with the message of striving to please God resulting in a perpetual feeling of guilt.

Human Effort Drives Transformation

While this article presents a critical opinion of the WCG apocalyptic worldview, it's important to acknowledge alternative perspectives and counterarguments. This section explores a more balanced view that values both future possibilities and present-day challenges, highlighting the importance of human agency and providing examples of human-driven transformation.

A balanced worldview acknowledges the potential for future transformation while recognizing the urgency of addressing present-day concerns (15, 20). It encourages individuals to engage with the world around them, seeking to make a positive impact today while remaining open to future possibilities. This perspective recognizes that human potential is not limited to a future role in a utopian world but can be realized in the present through personal growth, social responsibility, and active participation in local communities.

While acknowledging the role of faith, it's crucial to highlight the value of human effort in creating a better future (21, 22). Throughout history, individuals and movements have made significant contributions to society through their dedication, ingenuity, and perseverance. From scientific breakthroughs to social movements, human effort has been instrumental in driving progress and improving conditions.

Examples of human-driven transformation abound. Secular self-help and therapy provide individuals with tools and strategies for personal growth and overcoming challenges. Community support and social movements empower individuals to work together to address issues and create positive change (23, 24). Humanistic psychology emphasizes human potential and self-actualization, encouraging individuals to take responsibility for their own lives and strive for personal growth (25, 26).

By embracing a balanced perspective that values both faith and human agency, individuals can navigate the complexities of life with a sense of purpose and empowerment. This approach encourages engagement with the world, fosters personal growth, and promotes a proactive approach to shaping a better future for oneself and for humanity as a whole.

Realizing Potential Today

This article has briefly considered the paradox of "The Incredible Human Potential," arguing that the WCG's apocalyptic worldview and doctrine of calling can inadvertently limit human potential by overemphasizing a future-focused perspective and neglecting present-day realities and needs.

We've examined how this worldview can lead to a devaluation of present-day concerns, disengagement from social and political issues and a diminished sense of personal agency. We've also touched upon the potential consequences of a delayed focus on helping humanity, including missed opportunities for growth and impact, social isolation, and a disingenuous approach to evangelism.

This article encourages a more balanced perspective that values both future possibilities and present-day challenges. It emphasizes the importance of human agency, personal growth, and engagement with the world, urging readers to seek and embrace their full potential here and now.

Critically examine the implications of your beliefs on your life and your engagement with the world. Take an active approach to shaping a better future, both for yourself and for humanity as a whole, recognizing that human potential is not limited to a future utopia but can be realized in the present through conscious choices and meaningful action.

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